

Indiana House of Representatives

News and Information

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

January 31, 2005

REP. TRENT VAN HAAFTEN'S STATEHOUSE REPORT

INDIANAPOLIS – As the first month of the 2005 session of the Indiana General Assembly draws to a close, most of the legislative process is focusing on the actions of committees in both the House and Senate.

While these reports have always been a means of keeping you up to date on the action that has taken place, I also want to use this space to discuss with you the process of how a bill becomes a law, in an effort to help you understand where my bills are in the legislative process and the roadblocks they face.

Every bill must follow a long road before it is signed into law by the governor. A bill's language is drafted by a non-partisan office known as the Legislative Services Agency (LSA). In addition to the language, LSA performs a fiscal analysis to determine if a bill would provide revenue for the state or cost the state money. Obviously, any bill with a negative fiscal impact has a tougher road to travel.

After receiving the bill from LSA, the measure must be filed with the House Clerk. It is then sent to the Speaker of the House for first reading, which simply means that the Speaker decides whether or not a bill will be assigned to a particular committee. If the bill is never assigned to a committee, it is dead. If a bill is assigned to a committee, the chairman of that committee will decide if it gets a hearing. The Speaker is always a member of the majority party and appoints the committee chairs. As you can see, the power of the legislative process definitely rests with the majority.

If a bill gets assigned to a committee, the chairman must be lobbied to get a hearing. Over the past week, my efforts to get hearings on two different bills I authored show how difficult it can be to move legislation.

House Bill 1684 is a measure that would require insurance companies to provide coverage for in vitro fertilization for couples medically unable to have a child. Going into this session, I knew that mandates placed on insurance companies would not be favored by the House majority, even though such mandates would help Hoosiers. These concerns came true when the committee chairman informed me that he has promised "others" that no insurance mandates would be considered in his committee this year. HB 1684 was dealt a swift blow of defeat.

Other problems cropped up for my bill designed to preserve the New Harmony Bridge. As many of you are aware, we are trying to get the state of Indiana to take ownership of the bridge. The chair of the House Roads and Transportation Committee has not committed to giving me a hearing on this bill because she is concerned that it will have a fiscal impact on the State. I also believe majority members are lobbying her to not support an initiative by a member of the minority.

However, I know that I can gain an important ally if I can get the Governor's Office to support this project. That is why I also met with the new commissioner of the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) and the new finance director of the Transportation Finance Authority, the two entities that will be directly affected if this bill passes. If these agencies are supportive, it is easier to get a hearing.

To date, I have yet to get a commitment from either the committee chair or the state agencies that this bill will get a hearing. Since the agency heads have been on the job for less than a month, they have asked for more time to decide which stance to take.

Needless to say, there is more work to do and time is of the essence! House members must complete committee action on bills and joint resolutions filed in our chamber by February 24.

If a bill does receive a committee hearing, then the author is responsible for presenting the legislation in committee and lining up witnesses to speak in favor of it. Committee hearings are public, so anyone can attend and speak in favor of or in opposition to the bill. Testimony can be both informative and, at times, entertaining.

Each committee is made up of members from each party, but the majority party always outnumbers the minority party members. Hopefully, the bill will be determined on its merits and not party politics. If the bill passes out of committee, it moves to the entire House for second reading. In the weeks to come, I will continue to share with you the process of second and third readings.

Next week, I will bring you up to date on the Legislature's business. I would also encourage you to attend our first legislative forum in Posey County. Senator Larry Lutz and I will be at the Poseyville Community Center on Saturday morning. Please come by with any questions or concerns you have for our state. If you are not able to attend, do not hesitate to contact me at the Statehouse.

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